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TAGS: PREL PGOV ASEC VE
SUBJECT: UNEVEN ELECTORAL PLAYING FIELD FAVORS CHAVISMO

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: A number of opposition and even pro-government dissident candidates have complained to the National Electoral Council (CNE) about the PSUV enjoying an unfair advantage as state resources are being used in its favor. The government-owned media outlets are blatant in their support for the PSUV, to the point where there is virtually no distinction between state and party. State-owned vehicles have been used in a variety of ways to support PSUV campaigns, including busing Chavista supporters to rallies. Although Chavez has agreed to suspend his weekly television show until after the elections to avoid the appearance of impropriety, he plans to make use of mandatory TV broadcasts ("cadenas") for inaugurations of new state projects -- with local PSUV candidates at his side. Some opposition party leaders have also complained that they do not have access to the voting lists. These irregularities, and the apparent unwillingness of the CNE to enforce its own rules, suggest that the non-PSUV candidates will be campaigning on a field tilted very much against them. End Summary.

PSUV AT AN ADVANTAGE

¶12. (C) At a October 1 campaign financing conference sponsored by the Center for Policy and Citizenship Formation that included CNE rector Vicente Diaz, speakers pointed to the widespread use of state resources for campaigns. They noted that the constitution prohibits the direct use of government money to finance political parties. They cited as an example that cranes owned by the state electricity company have been used to replace opposition campaign posters with those of the PSUV. The speakers also noted that the CNE had decided that campaign "soundbites" would need to be vetted through them before being broadcast, potentially giving them the power to censor anti-Chavez material.

¶13. (SBU) Dissident candidates from within Chavismo who are not running on the PSUV ticket have been particularly vocal in opposing misuse of government funds. Daniel Garcia, secretary general of the tiny Gente Emergente (GE) party, told pro-opposition tabloid Tal Cual on October 6 that he had filed complaints about violations with the CNE in Barinas state but "they don't listen." Garcia claims that a permanent billboard has been erected by PSUV gubernatorial candidate Adan Chavez in front of the doors of the local PDVSA headquarters, and that GE's campaign signs had been

torn down. GE was expelled from Chavez's "patriotic alliance" last week for its support of dissident gubernatorial candidate for Barinas state Julio Cesar Reyes.

¶4. (SBU) Andrea Tavares, Patria Para Todos (PPT) candidate for the mayorship of the Libertador borough of Caracas, told the media that her campaign signs were removed by trucks from the Caracas electricity company on Bolivar Avenue -- on grounds that it is a public thoroughfare. Signs supporting PSUV candidates were not removed. Lenny Manuitt, PPT candidate for governor in Guarico state, alleged that Chavistas are "embezzling" state funds in the interior of the country to use in campaigns. She presented photographs of state-owned trucks being used to support her PSUV rival, William Lara, at a political rally on September 13.

¶5. (SBU) Bella Petrizzo, PPT gubernatorial candidate for Portuguesa state, has accused her PSUV opponent Wilmar Castro of using public institutions to aid his campaign. She pointed to advertisements for Castro in the local press with both the PSUV logo and that of the state-owned Industrial Bank of Venezuela and the phrase "Wilmar Castro -- Governor."

Petrizzo also protested that Castro was seeking to link the social missions to the PSUV and that mission workers feared reprisals if they did not support the PSUV. She told pro-opposition daily El Universal on September 29 that "it hurts me how they play with people's necessities." Nevertheless, she contended that she was "sure" that Chavez does not condone these practices, highlighting the dissidents' willingness to attack their PSUV rivals but not the President directly.

CNE ACKNOWLEDGES SOME BIAS

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¶6. (SBU) On October 9, the CNE's Political Participation and Financing Commission announced a formal accusation of bias against state-owned Venezuela TV (VTV). CNE rector Vicente Diaz told the press that VTV was not allowing equal partisan access because only PSUV candidates have participated in the channel's opinion programs. Four hours later, Diaz announced that he would also summon the director of pro-opposition Globovision TV on October 15, presumably to investigate charges that it favors opposition candidates. According to pro-opposition daily El Nacional, the CNE also plans to begin examining charges of unfair campaigning next week against opposition gubernatorial candidate for Zulia state Pablo Perez and PSUV candidate for the mayorship of Sucre Jesse Chacon. Diaz also claimed that the suspension of Chavez's weekly televised "Alo, Presidente" show until after the elections was a result of conversations between the CNE and Minister of Communication Andres Izarra, claiming its curtailment is to avoid the "administrative embarrassment" of using state funds for electoral ends.

¶7. (C) Comment: The CNE is widely recognized to be unduly influenced by Chavez. Despite its apparent willingness to look into some claims of bias, it is unlikely to effectively curtail the blatant and widespread use of state resources to benefit Chavista candidates. Although opposition party representatives were invited by the CNE to witness the outfitting of balloting machines with the voting software as a measure of transparency, they have complained to us about their lack of access to key information like voting lists -- which could prove vital in contested races. To date, opposition parties are reluctant to denounce CNE technical biases for fear that their complaints will only exacerbate abstentionism. End Comment.

CAULFIELD